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ABSTRACT

A survey investigated the attitudes and preferences of business administration students concerning college courses in international business and job assignments abroad. Respondents were from 13 regional business schools, broadly distributed in the United States. All were public institutions. Questions elicited information about student characteristics (major, sex, class, country of citizenship), foreign travel, languages spoken, overseas work experience, number of international business courses already taken, interest in additional courses, feelings about a three-year assignment abroad, and feelings about a 30-day assignment abroad. Results indicate strong differences based on the number of languages spoken and all the dependent variables (international courses taken/planned, job assignment preferences), for the sample as a whole and for American students within it. Foreign students, in general, were very interested in international courses and career assignments, regardless of number of languages spoken. Implications are outlined for business curriculum and program design and for emphasis given to languages in the curriculum. Contains 21 references. (MSE)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND INTEREST IN GLOBAL BUSINESS COURSES AND CAREERS

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INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century draws to a close one of the most important economic facts of life is the increasing internationalization of business. Companies, both large and small and from nations all over the world, are looking beyond the borders of their respective home countries in search of both suppliers and markets. As a result of this growing internationalization, companies are finding that their managerial needs are changing. International companies need managers that (1) are nationally diverse, and (2) are culturally sensitive. That is, managers must be drawn from many countries in order to get the best people available and to ensure an understanding of the various countries in which the international firm is doing business. Additionally, these managers, no matter what country they come from, must be willing and able to understand and adapt to the multiplicity of cultures in which the firm is operating.

As business educators we have an obligation to make our students more sensitive to different cultures and so prepare them for success in the world of international business. Our ability to do this is, in no small measure, a function of student attitudes and interests. So, an important question facing us is: How receptive are our students toward international curricula and international careers? This paper is an attempt to begin answering that question.

Most of the recent academic literature addresses the need to internationalize curricula in business schools, community colleges, and liberal arts programs. The impetus for this emanates from the competitive business communities at home and abroad as domestic and foreign companies seek new markets for their goods and services. This trend is further reflected in the direction taken by accrediting agencies, particularly the AACSB, who have mandated that business schools internationalize and culturally diversify their various programs. Several authors have addressed the forces affecting curriculum changes as well as developing programs to equip faculty with the background needed to teach these international courses (Esemuede, 1988; Kwok, Arpan, and Folks, 1993; McGrath and Hargrove, 1992; Mason, 1992; Shooshtari and Flemming, 1991; Smith and Rushland, 1994).

A number of studies have emphasized interdisciplinary efforts in developing major and minor curricula. These studies have proposed which business subjects should be covered; what cultural, language, and geography courses should be included; and the need to have internships as integral program components (Devine, 1993; Francesco, 1993; Gorjanc, 1993; Harris, 1993; Krajewski and Patrick, 1994, Lincoln and Naumann, 1992; Marco, 1993; Teagarden and Branan, 1993).

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Given the wealth of academic research concerning internationalizing curricula and faculty development, it is interesting to note that few studies have researched the needs and wants or our primary customers -- the students themselves. One particular study, Hill and Tillery (1992), had the express purpose of examining ". . . the attitudes and perceptions of the undergraduate business student . . . toward an international business career." This study was based on survey results from 99 junior and senior business students who had expressed an interest in international business. The Hill and Tillery study found favorable attitudes toward international business courses, careers, and overseas assignments of two or more years. However, it was found that these attitudes differed by gender with male students being more favorably inclined toward international careers than their female counterparts.

Another study, by Turley, Shannon, and Miller (1993), explored 1) attitudes of marketing majors toward international marketing and the preparation they were receiving for international marketing positions and 2) the foreign language skills of these same marketing students. The sample was national in scope but limited to members of student American Marketing Association chapters. Of those responding, 97.8 percent either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with the statement "International marketing will be more important in the future." But, only 23.2 percent believed that they had received good preparation for an international marketing career from their school (48.8 percent were neutral and 28.0 percent felt the preparation received was inadequate). These students believed overwhelmingly (88.1 percent yes: 2.1 percent no) that an international marketing course should be required of all marketing majors. A large majority (61 percent) also believed that marketing majors should be required to take a course focusing on a foreign culture. And, in what Turley and his colleagues considered to be a surprising finding, 53.7 percent thought that a foreign language should be required in the marketing major. It should be noted that of the respondents, 69.5 percent reported being "at least minimally proficient in at least one foreign language."

It seems logical to us that language proficiency would have a positive effect on students' interest in international business courses and careers. It is the purpose of this paper to explore that connection.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample. Our sample consisted of 13 regional schools of business. All were public institutions. The schools were selected on a non-random basis to achieve balanced geographical representation. A faculty member at each school was contacted by telephone and asked to cooperate in the administration of the surveys. The surveys were conducted in Introduction to Business classes (or Introduction to Marketing classes at schools that do not offer Introduction to Business) and the business capstone course. Obtaining prior agreement to participate by faculty members ensured that we did not have a non-response problem. All of the faculty members contacted agreed to participate and did in fact administer and return the questionnaires (which we greatly appreciate).

Survey Instrument. The questionnaire was a short, one-page (front and back), instrument

which took 5 to 10 minutes to complete. It consisted primarily of closed end questions with a few short answer open ended questions (such as "Of what country are you a citizen?" and "How many languages do you speak?") Questions were designed to elicit information in three areas:

Demographics: Major, Sex, Class, and country of citizenship.

Cosmopolitanism: Foreign travel, languages spoken, and overseas work experience.

Interest in international courses and careers: Number of international courses already taken, interest in taking additional international business courses, feelings about a 3-year job assignment abroad, and feelings about a 30-day job assignment abroad.

Analytical techniques. Data was entered into a standard spreadsheet and analyzed using standard statistical packages. Tabulation, Cross-tabulation, and chi-square (χ^2) statistics were run on the data.

The independent variables used in this study were sex, country of citizenship, foreign travel experience, and number of languages spoken. Each of these was examined with respect to the following dependent variables: interest in taking international business courses, number of international business courses taken, intention to take additional business courses, feelings about taking a 3-year overseas assignment, and feelings about accepting a 30-day overseas assignment. Additionally, we looked at the relationship between citizenship and number of languages spoken.

FINDINGS

1. 49 percent of the sample were females, 51 percent were males.
2. 91 percent of the sample identified themselves as citizens of the US, 9 percent identified themselves as citizens of other countries.
3. 62 percent of the sample reported speaking only one language. 30 percent reported speaking two languages, 8 percent spoke three or more languages.
4. Respondents' sex was a differentiating factor with regard to feelings about a 3-year assignment overseas, but did not show an association with the other dependent variables. We found relationships between respondents' citizenship and foreign travel experiences and all of the dependent variables. [1]
5. In our sample, American students reported an average of 1.36 languages spoken, non-American students reported speaking an average of 2.59 languages, a statistically significant difference.

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[1] For a complete discussion of this topic see Abramson, Hollingshead and Robbins, "Foreign Travel as a Precursor of Interest in Global Business Courses and Careers," Proceedings of Marshall University Multi cultural Conference -- Developing Cultural Competencies for Tomorrow's Global Leaders. Huntington, WV. October 15 -16, 1996.

Table 1

Chi-Square Statistical Analysis: Number of Languages Spoken (All Students Sampled)

n = 1550

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	$\chi^2 \leq .05$
Interest in taking international business courses?	Yes
How many international business courses have you taken?	Yes
Do you plan on taking more international business courses?	Yes
How do you feel about a 3-year overseas assignment?	Yes
How do you feel about a 30-day overseas assignment?	Yes

6. Table 1 shows we found a positive relationship between the number of languages spoken and both interest in taking international business courses as well as the number of international business courses taken. Multilingual students, on a per capita basis, have taken more international courses. We also found a positive relationship between the number of languages spoken and whether or not the individual planned to take additional international business courses. Those speaking only one language (English) are less likely to plan on taking additional international courses than are those who speak two or more languages. Furthermore, we found a significant difference between those speaking two or more languages and those speaking only one language with respect to a three-year assignment overseas. Significantly more of those speaking two or more languages indicated they "would really like" a three-year overseas assignment. Finally, we found a significant difference between the two groups with respect to a 30-day assignment overseas. 68 percent of "one-language" students "would really like" a 30-day overseas assignment compared to 81 percent of multilingual students.

Table 2

Chi-Square Statistical Analysis: Number of Languages Spoken (American Students)

n = 1429

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	$\chi^2 \leq .05$
Interest in taking international business courses?	Yes
How many international business courses have you taken?	Yes
Do you plan on taking more international business courses?	Yes
How do you feel about a 3-year overseas assignment?	Yes
How do you feel about a 30-day overseas assignment?	Yes

7. As shown in Table 2, there is a statistically significant difference in interest in American students' interest in international courses and careers based upon the number of languages they speak.

Table 3

Chi-Square Statistical Analysis: Number of Languages Spoken (Non-American Students)

n = 150

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	$\chi^2 \leq .05$
Interest in taking international business courses?	No
How many international business courses have you taken?	No
Do you plan on taking more international business courses?	No
How do you feel about a 3-year overseas assignment?	No
How do you feel about a 30-day overseas assignment?	No

8. As per Table 3, non-American students do not show statistically significant differences in interest in international courses and careers based upon the number of languages spoken, they had high scores in both areas. This is to be expected because the sample is biased toward cosmopolitans. These foreign business students, by virtue of their studying at a university not in their own country, are internationally oriented.

CONCLUSIONS

Strong differences were found based upon the number of languages spoken and all of the dependent variables for the sample as a whole and for American students in the sample. This was not true for non-American students. Foreign students as a group were very interested in international courses and career assignments. They were homogeneously high in their international orientation so their language skills are not a discriminating factor. This may be a case of self selection error in the study because the non-American students studied cannot be said to be representative of all non-American college students. By virtue of their attendance at American universities, they exhibit a bias toward internationalism. Further research should study foreign business students in their own countries to determine their attitudes and should also study American business students at foreign universities for their attitudes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As faculty members we need to better promote international business courses and stimulate interest in international business careers to our students. Our findings suggest this can be accomplished by placing more emphasis on foreign languages in our curriculum, even to the extent that languages be required as part of a complete business education. Classroom exposure to foreign languages should be enhanced by real-world experiences. Therefore, we suggest that more foreign students be recruited by American colleges of business so that there are more opportunities for American students to interact with non-American students and that colleges of business promote activities that cause such interactions.

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